

FORUM ON TRANSNATIONALISM

Same Difference? Transnationalism, Comparative Literature, and Victorian Studies

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At the end of *Notes on England* (1872), literary critic and historian Hippolyte Taine asks, “Which of the two forms of civilisation is the more valuable, that of England or that of France?” (373). Although this may seem like a rhetorical question, Taine proceeds to answer it with solemn precision. “Three things are superior in England”: its political constitution, religion, and power of wealth. “On the other hand, three things are better in France”: its climate, distribution of wealth, and domestic and social life (375). Taine’s equivocal response to his question illustrates the difficulty of truly differentiating between France and England, two nations perpetually opposed yet perpetually balanced.

Taine was neither unique, nor uniquely French, in his turn to a comparative form that was equally popular among British and French authors. Ironically, one of the characteristics that linked the French and the British was their shared zeal for noting national differences.

For the following forum we asked Sharon Marcus and Irene Tucker to write brief essays assessing the status of, possibilities for, and obstacles to the transnational study of nineteenth-century cultures. While inviting them to shape their essays as they saw fit, we were especially interested in learning about the methodological and/or theoretical developments required by such a transnational Victorian studies. Among the questions that prompted our proposing the forum were these: How have contemporary forms of historicist scholarship invited us to ignore transnational relations? Has the study of colonial relations occluded transnational studies? What have the costs been of occlusion? What topics of study invite transnational scholarship? What is the relation between transnational and comparative studies? In their responses to these questions, both Marcus and Tucker implicitly imagine a less parochial, more self-aware scholarship, rooted in a richly historicized sense of Britain’s place in its world.

Not only did the French and British agree that they were different, they even agreed about how they were different. Most English writers invested in the notion of national character would have agreed with Taine's characterizations of the divergences between French and British culture. So heartily did the English and French agree about their differences that one begins to suspect that the many oppositions generated by English and French observers alike were attempts to create variety in the face of interchangeability.

Even the most frequently cited contrasts between France and England—between Parisian extroversion and English domesticity, or between French sexual sophistication and English virtue—repeatedly converged. In the introduction to *Gavarni in London*, an 1849 anthology illustrated by a French artist, Albert Smith insisted that only Parisians liked to ramble in city streets, yet the book's essays, written by Englishmen, focused almost exclusively on London's streets, not its homes. The cosmopolitan qualities of metropolitan culture meant that nineteenth-century urbanization decreased the difference between capitals and the nations they represented even in an era of intensified nationalism. Nineteenth-century attempts to give sex a national character similarly transformed contrast into convergence. British literature and criticism famously associated sexual immorality with France and Frenchness: think of Becky Sharp's French mother and perfect French accent, or the critical reception of Honoré de Balzac and Charles Algernon Swinburne. While some French authors contrasted their nation's sexual sophistication to British prudery, other French writers mirrored the English characterization of France by identifying sexual perversity as distinctly English. Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, for example, ignored the etymological Frenchness of the word "sadism" in "Le Sadisme Anglais" (1885), a mock dialogue between English speakers who defend their country's reputation for sexual perversion by pointing to Swinburne as evidence for the fact that the dominant "sensual fantasies [. . .] of the majority of the English" include sadism, sex with children, and lesbianism (76).

In the very act of insisting that the English smelled bad and were unduly licentious, the Frenchman revealed himself to be thinking exactly like the Englishman who leveled the same charges against the French. This identical manner of articulating invidious differences across cultures has been explained by anthropologists as a universal impulse among humans confronting otherness to assert identity by invoking cate-

gories of dirt and sex, which lack real content but powerfully activate processes that draw borders and thus give form to collective identities (Douglas). Sigmund Freud called the obsessive cataloguing of distinctions between relatively similar groups “the narcissism of minor differences.” Freud first used the term in “The Taboo of Virginity” (1918) (199) and applied it to national differences in two other works, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921) (101), and *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930) (114). His examples in the latter two essays are the hatred between Spaniards and Portuguese, the English and Scottish, and North and South Germans. For Freud, the narcissism of minor differences allows members of a group to take the aggression that is a component of their love for one another and direct it against neighbors who closely resemble those inside the group. Freud is interested in how the apparent opposites of aggression and affection coexist in the libido, but his analysis also suggests that what troubles is not difference, but similarity. The lack of any real distinction between hate and love, self and putative other threatens the cohesion of a group’s sense of a separate and unique identity. Thus the very drive to assert difference where relatively little exists manifests a more fundamental similarity.

I open with this extended parable of France and England, of identity in difference, in order to illustrate the problems with simply superimposing the term “transnational” on the type of study associated with old-fashioned comparative literature. As I discuss below, “transnational” is a term that when used rigorously refers to countries whose power relations are asymmetrical, while traditional comparative literature tends to focus on countries whose powers are so balanced that it is difficult to distinguish among them. But I want to emphasize at the outset that any comparative question is a daring one for *Victorian Studies* to ask, since by its very title this journal defines itself in terms specific to English history and politics. In delimiting its temporal borders as Victorian, the journal also posits the homogeneity of what lies inside its spatial and linguistic ones. In recent years Victorian studies and *Victorian Studies* have promoted an increasingly expansive definition of their spatial territory by expanding out from the English nation into the United Kingdom and the British Empire, but the journal’s linguistic borders remain those of standard English. Though many articles address England’s traffic with the non-English speaking world, few require knowledge of Scottish dialect, Gaelic, Welsh, Sanskrit, Hindi, Arabic, French, German, Latin, or Greek. “Victorian studies” suggests a nationally based approach funda-

mentally at odds with the traditional polyglot model of comparative literature, exemplified in works as different as Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis* (1953), Mikhail Bakhtin's work on the chronotope (1937-38), and Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious* (1981).

Comparative literature is also difficult to graft onto transnational approaches because although comparative literature promotes linguistic internationalism, it imposes its own conceptual homogeneity, in which national and historical differences are subsumed, even erased, by universal theoretical categories like the Author, the Novel, lyric, narrative, mimesis, or realism. Comparatists give those concepts histories by charting their variation over time, usually in terms of developmental narratives about their rise (and occasional fall); comparatists also give those concepts histories by charting their relation to grand master narratives (the Enlightenment, the aesthetic, modes of production). But theoretical concepts in comparative literature rarely have histories in the sense of being meaningfully divisible by national difference. The whole point of theorizing the Novel is to identify a form whose core features transcend the inessential variations that attend its emergence in imperial Rome, Heian Japan, absolutist France, Enlightenment Scotland, or Victorian England.

The influence of New Historicism on Victorian literary studies has highlighted the possibility of a truly comparative literature, one that studies variations and interactions among national literatures rather than unchanging categories like literature or literariness. New Historicism asks critics to attend to literature's shifting political, ideological, and sociological contexts, and in doing so disables the homogenizing abstractions of traditional comparative approaches. Yet New Historicism has also militated against comparative literary approaches precisely because of its emphasis on national and chronological specificity. New Historicism equates the historical with the particular, and that emphasis on particularity has had the effect of circumscribing literary study within increasingly local frameworks. Conversely, some New Historicists have turned to the concepts grounding traditional comparative literature (modernity, fiction, the imagination) in an effort to resolve the tension between historicism, which blurs the line between literature and its contexts, and literary theory, which seeks to define the literariness of literary objects. This turn risks lapsing into the ahistoricism most severely challenged by New Historicist methods that

in theory, if not always in practice, can make literary studies more comparative.

Postcolonial studies have also productively troubled the unified and idealized generic categories that were the basis of traditional comparative literature. More importantly, postcolonial studies have exploded the category of the nation on which comparative literature implicitly depends: to be a comparatist is to study more than one national literature. By studying encounters between Western imperial forces and colonized people, postcolonial critics have shown how the English novel is fissured by its incorporation of the colonies. The novel can no longer be understood as simply a metropolitan genre. As Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, Gauri Viswanathan, and many others have shown, European literature and its academic study cannot be separated from the texts and contexts of Orientalism, imperialism, and colonial resistance. The same point has been made with respect to England and its internal colonies. Katie Trumpener has vividly shown how the works of Walter Scott, to whom French and British realists were so indebted, depended in turn on national tales and romances written throughout the Celtic periphery.

Is transnational a useful term for naming new directions in comparative literature? As Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan note in a cogent article on "Global Identities" (2001), transnationalism is most meaningful when it references "the asymmetries of the globalization process" (664) and how those asymmetries "become the conditions of possibility of new subjects" (671). Yet they also note the recent tendency of the term to mean all things to all people. Transnational frameworks for literary studies have been among the most important renovations of literary criticism and history in recent decades. To date those frameworks have been most notable in Victorian studies for alerting us both to the porousness of national borders and the violence with which national literatures controlled border crossings. Yet transnational Victorian studies, though it operates with a more sophisticated theory of world-systems than traditional comparative literature, continues to lack comparative literature's linguistic and hence conceptual range: studies of English imperialism remain focused on works written and translated into English, and thus primarily explore English perspectives on England's imperialism. Those studies are of paramount importance, but to limit our knowledge of imperialism to them reproduces the very dominance of English culture and imperial power such work set out to

question. The almost complete neglect of the United States in Victorian studies shows that the resistance to displacing Victorian England from the center of inquiry is not simply a matter of learning more languages but of thinking in less imperialist terms. A monolingual approach cannot even fully grasp the imperialists, many of whom knew far more languages than Victorianists now do, and falls terribly short of grasping the complexities and internal differentiations of empire generated by the linguistic and cultural differences among colonized peoples. Given the centrality of imperialism to the Victorian period, we will only have a real grasp of Victorian literature's transnational dynamic when Victorianist scholarship includes proficiency in non-Western languages.

But what of the comparatist who continues to focus on literatures produced in European languages, who studies some combination of English, Spanish, French, German, Italian, Russian, Latin, and Greek literature? How might transnational approaches change traditional approaches to comparing the literatures of European nations? As I noted above, transnational approaches have complicated the identity of European nations and genres by subsuming nations within empires, and more work remains to be done on comparative imperialism. But transnationalism has transformed comparative literature, even for those who do not study empire, for two reasons. First, transnational approaches encourage us to see how, even in its heyday, print culture was international and the nation was a relative, hybrid, comparative category. Second, transnationalism has been an important vector for historicizing comparative literature. An emphasis on historical specificity does not disable the notion of genre: a theoretical concept must have differences from which to generalize. But where traditional comparative literature focused on the *products* of genre formation—the genres themselves, ideally shorn of the distractions of time, place, and local politics—comparative approaches informed by transnationalism's inherent historicism pay more attention to genre-formation as a *process*. If by transnationalism we mean relations between countries defined by their asymmetries, then we should not apply that term to comparisons between countries defined by their symmetries, such as England and France. But even those who compare relatively balanced world powers can learn from the inherent interdisciplinarity of transnational approaches. Traditional comparative literature's stable, static paradigms envisioned nations as parallel, following the same trajectory but sealed off from actual contact. A comparative literature informed by

transnationalism, alert to the dynamic movement, traffic, and interplay between nations and languages, can help to explain both the differences and the remarkable degree of generic and narrative coherence within world literature.

Let me conclude by returning to the example with which I began. In the case of nineteenth-century French and English studies (comparison does require us to jettison the term Victorian), what kinds of research projects might result from an approach to comparative literary studies informed by transnationalism? Theater and drama studies remain an underdeveloped aspect of French and British nineteenth-century studies as conducted separately, and anyone who studies either country's theater history should attend to the transnational migration of actors and stage material, as well as compare theater-going and adaptation practices (see, for example, Kruger). In the case of England, where so many plays were simply plagiarized translations of French works, the study of national theater must be comparative. Fashion is another crucial area of international exchange between France and England. Although the essays in a recent collection entitled *The Englishness of English Dress* (2002) are persuasive in their arguments for national dress, far more work needs to be done on fashion's even greater importance as a site of transnational sociability, emulation, and competition among bourgeois women. The international character of fashion points in two other directions for comparative research: women's culture and visual culture. Women's culture includes both feminist praxis, whose international dimensions could be better charted, and the material culture of dolls and toys, children's literature, crafts and hobbies, furniture and interior decorations, and music. In the realm of visual culture, we need a better understanding of the interactions between British and French artists, art institutions, artistic movements and genres, theories of perception, and technologies such as lithography and photography.

A renovated comparative studies also needs frameworks that articulate the commonalities and the differences between the entities compared. Somewhere between the grand historical narratives that shaped France and England alike (capitalism, imperialism, liberalism, secular science, disciplinary society) and the local periodizations that divide them (Victorian, Restoration, Second Empire, Commune, Third Republic) lie historical eras yet to be named. Those periods correspond to social and cultural history, which when conducted comparatively illu-

minate what is specific to a given nation and what circulates among nations, to be contested or shared. What would Raymond Williams's *Culture and Society* (1958) or *The Country and the City* (1973) look like if those books took Europe rather than England as their subjects? What if we were to write a comparative history of nineteenth-century sexuality? There have been important studies, for example, of male homosexuality in England, particularly its criminalization, its subcultures, and its elaboration in high culture; and there have similarly been important studies of the consequences of sodomy's decriminalization in France. But there has been very little work that puts these two histories together, despite the fact that differences in French and English sexual codes generated a flow of bodies and texts between the two countries.

To take another example, from work already underway, what if we were to undo the equation of novel and nation made by Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel* (1957) and Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983)? To do so requires questioning the solidity of national and linguistic boundaries during nationalism's putative heyday. The essays in Margaret Cohen and Carolyn Dever's anthology *The Literary Channel* (2002) provide examples of recent work in novel studies that has begun to unearth how translation, criticism, and transnational communities of readers made even the most nationally identified prose works international in origin and reach. This is not the first time such studies have been undertaken. In the wake of World War I, a spate of comparative studies documented the travels, connections, and influence of French writers in England and English writers in France, and more recently scholars have published similar, though more sophisticated, studies of George Sand's and Charles Baudelaire's receptions in England (see Blount, Clements, Couch, Delattre, Partridge, Thomson). In the 1920s, several scholars also began to write the history of the translation of French and British novels in book and serial form (see Devonshire, Frierson). We learn from these studies that the French dismissed Jane Austen as a regional novelist but embraced Charles Dickens as a humorist; that French reviewers were particularly interested in the British sensation novel; and that despite English antipathy to French mores and fiction, more French novels were translated into English than vice versa.

Scholars in the early decades of the twentieth century emphasized contact between national literatures in a way that literary critics today, almost a century later, should relearn. Our predecessors empha-

sized bibliography and biography and as a result the information they gathered needs to be theorized anew. But their mastery of at least two languages and national literatures allowed them to understand English and European culture in terms not exclusively English. Naive as they now seem, those early comparative studies still have something to teach us. They offer a welcome corrective to the Victorianist tendency to see the world through English eyes only, and they challenge us to conduct our scholarly journeys into the nineteenth-century past speaking in tongues other than the English one.

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